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Dancing for Money, Men and Gods

Temple Women in Historical Perspectives

STINE SIMONSEN PURI

In Tranquebar in 1623, Jon Olafsson, a soldier serving the Danish king during the first year of the establishment of the Danish colony in South India, makes interesting observations of the daily life in the village. Especially interesting are his descriptions of female dancers in front of one of the temples in close vicinity to Fort Dansborg, where he was on daily guard. In his memoirs he writes:

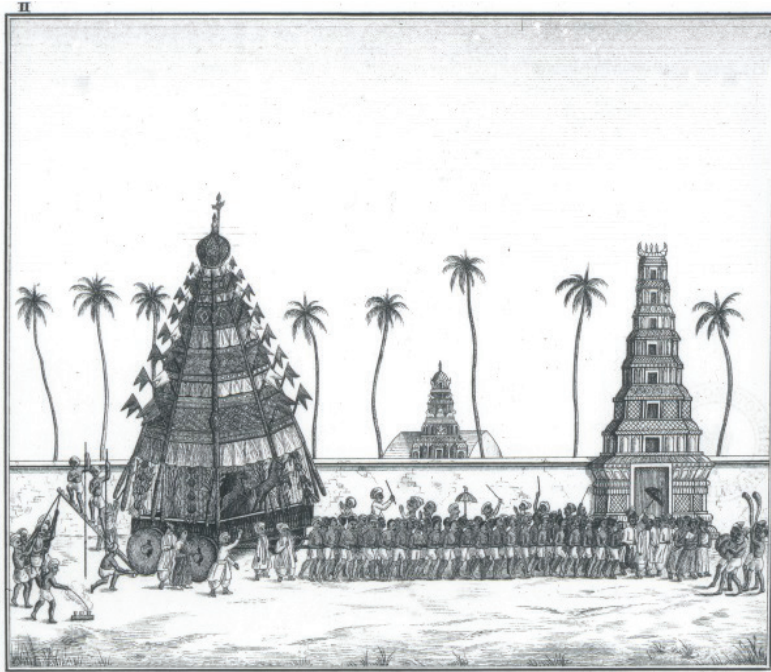
And when the evening drew on, this chariot with its idols and all the aforesaid pomp was dragged to its usual place opposite the temple doors. And when they approached with it, all the harlots came out of the church, *pagódasirke*, to dance before the gods, and with them their master, who is called *baldor*. He hires them out every day for money, both to the soldiers and the bachelors in the town, and this money is put into the treasure-house of the temple and is used for its upkeep; but the harlots get their keep out of the revenues of the temple, paid to them by the wardens.

The priest, who usually sits by the church door, and is called *brameni* [sic], also goes out to greet the gods with great humility and obeisance, and then they are carried in, in great honour, by three picked men among them, the sons of the priest, with much beating of drums and loud blasts on the trumpets, and other music, and also the dancing of the temple harlots in their finery, which between

whiles, when they are not serving the gods, is hung up in the church.
(Olafsson 1661/1998: 123)¹

In the following, I shall look into the roles of what are today known in India as the *devadasis* ('slaves of the gods,' in Sanskrit) and in the West as temple dancers. My point of departure is South India in the seventeenth century, during the early years of Danish colonialism. I shall, furthermore, examine the moral judgement of the women inherent in the term 'temple harlots' by which Olafsson described them. At this time, these temple women had several tasks during the day, including dancing during processions, when the gods of the temples were brought out as described above. In addition, the temple women had a special role to play for their upper-caste male patrons, whom they provided with entertainment and a potentially sexual relationship. Despite being from the lower caste and outcaste

Figure 8.1 Temple festival, engraving from late seventeenth century



Courtesy:

communities, the women were, however, well respected, which puzzled many European travellers.

Olafsson's source has never been used for research on temple women. Yet, it is especially interesting, because it covers a period in the history of temple women which has largely not been dealt with. In contrast to other contemporary European sources, which describe these dancing women based on short visits to royal courts or second-hand accounts, Olafsson's description is based on daily observations over a longer period of time and within a village context. The setting for these observations is also particularly interesting, since the coastal area east of Thanjavur is known as the area in which there has been a high number of temple women (Orr 2000: 45) and as the area in which a formalised devotional dance style, currently known as *bharatanatyam* (literally, Indian dance), has developed, as part of the involvement of the Thanjavur Nayak dynasty (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 40–49). In this sense, Olafsson's source can be used, on the one hand, to give insight into the institution of these women at a time and place that is poorly documented. On the other, it can be used to highlight a moral judgement shared by most European travellers at the time, as well as cultural encounters concerning women during the early colonialism at the emergence of a Danish colony.

The perception of the devadasis as mere prostitutes that is conveyed in European sources, including Olafsson's, was later shared by the Indian elite of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This led to the abolition of the practice of dedicating women to Hindu temples, as well as to the reinvention of the Indian 'classical dance' *bharatanatyam*. Olafsson's memoirs shed light on certain problematic issues related to the relationship between religion, sexuality and economy, which is still relevant to present-day *bharatanatyam* dancers. In its conclusion, therefore, this chapter will discuss the relevance of the local history of temple dancers for *bharatanatyam* dancers of today, drawing upon seven months of personal, ethnographical fieldwork undertaken at a *bharatanatyam* dance institute in northern India in 2005.²

This brings me to the overall aim of this chapter: to shed light on the symbolic significance of the temple dancers in defining moral standards for women in the public space, in between the sacred and the secular realms. I shall do this by focusing on the perception of

temple women in the seventeenth century and bharatanatyam dancers in the twenty-first century.

THE MEMOIRS OF JON OLAFSSON IN TRANQUEBAR

Jon Olafsson was born in Iceland in 1596, and became a Danish soldier in 1616, under the Danish king, Christian IV. As early as 1618, he had wanted to take part in the first Danish expedition to the East Indies with Admiral Ove Giedde on one of his five ships (Fihl 2009). However, he could not get leave from his military duties. In 1622, his luck improved and he boarded the ship *Chritianhafn*, for Tranquebar, the new Danish colony, only one year after it had been founded. Olafsson stepped ashore in 1623 and served as a soldier at Fort Dansborg for more than a year. Most historical data on Tranquebar from this period comes from official documents; Jon Olafsson's memoir—today a popular text in Iceland—therefore provides a unique insight into daily life in Tranquebar as it was encountered by an outsider (Fihl 1988).

Dealing with Olafsson's source, it is important to note that it is not a diary but a memoir, written down and finalised by his son several years after his return. In the account, published in 1661, the descriptions from Tranquebar are but part of a larger account, detailing his life and years of service under Christian IV. As Fihl has pointed out, his observations should therefore be understood as a narrative which has developed when retold in a Scandinavian setting and been adjusted to the moral sensibilities of the listeners (*ibid.*). The point is that his account of the temple women says just as much about where he is coming from as it does about the life of the dancers.

Fihl, who has also considered Olafsson's memoirs, in order to gain insight into Indo-Danish encounters, notices that Olafsson expresses both a fascination and a judgement of the foreign customs of the village (1988: 122). In relation to the temple women, as we will see, Olafsson seems especially fascinated with the temples' wealth, some of which these women display when they decorate their bodies with jewellery. At the same time, he seems judgemental in terms of their sexuality and their relationship to men.

Since the sixteenth century, temple women have been described by several European travellers. Yet, in this chapter I have, unlike most

accounts of temple women, chosen to work primarily with only one historical source. This enables me to position the text not only in relation to other writings on the temple women but in relation to a particular time and place, which is often lacking in the literature on the devadasis (Orr 2000: 9).

As has been noted by Daves Soneji, research on temple women and what have become known as devadasis falls into three categories and periods: first, a precolonial, medieval context; second, late colonialism with a focus on legal debates; and third, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the revival of the temple dance in the form of *bharatnatyam*. Soneji's point, presenting these three categories in devadasi historiography, is that certain local contexts are neglected, as well as the destinies of the present-day women of the devadasi communities (2012: 4). In line with part of this critique, it could have been extremely interesting to have complimented this research with fieldwork attempting to trace the devadasis' tradition or the role of dancing women in Tranquebar today, as well as to investigate the role of women in relation to temple rituals and prostitution (see also, Orchard 2007; Soneji 2012). However, this is beyond the scope of this research. On the contrary, the point I wish to make here, in relation to Soneji's categorisations of existing work, is the gap in research from medieval times to late colonialism, which leaves early colonialism insufficiently explored despite the fact that it is believed to be a time in which the transformation from temple women to courtesans took place (*ibid.*: 3).

In light of the lack of further research from this particular period and location, I therefore draw partly on research on the role of the temple women at different places in the region and at different times in history, although I do so with great caution, keeping in mind the critique of such a methodology within existing research on the devadasis.

Judging from Olafsson's source alone, there are three themes which entice Olafsson to see these women as temple harlots: religion, sexuality and money.

THE RITUAL ROLES OF AUSPICIOUS WOMEN

The Dutch anthropologist, Saskia Kersenboom-Story, has provided us with historical research (1987) on the unique ritual position of

the devadasis in India. Her main argument (ibid.: xix), which is in line with that of Amrit Srinivasan (1985) and Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (1985), is that the devadasis were highly respected in the local communities, where they were considered as *nityasumangalis*, which means ever-auspicious women, in Tamil. Her argument should be understood in relation, or even as a response, to a prevailing association of temple women with prostitution.

Kersenboom-Story unfolds the development of the devadasi institution from medieval times to Indian independence. According to her (and partly based on a European source from 1510), during the Vijayanagara empire in Tamil Nadu (1336–1565), temple women had a number of roles. First, at village ceremonies, they protected the people from the divine forces of village gods, which were considered dangerous. Second, at the *Agamic*³ temples, the dancers served the gods themselves by taking care of their statues and performing for them in the temples, as well as protecting them during processions outside the temples. And finally, they enhanced the prestige of the kings—who had a god-like status—for example, by dancing at their processions (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 36). According to Kersenboom-Story, the reason for the devadasis' presence at all these different functions was because they were considered auspicious.

Kersenboom-Story's work is especially interesting in relation to Olafsson's consistent observations, because she tries to reconstruct the daily schedule for the temple women—which involves morning rituals, cleaning, processions, putting gods and goddesses to bed, etc. According to her, the ritual participation of the devadasis was concentrated on the dusk prayer (1987: 112, 2010: 62). At this time, the devadasis would wave torches to keep away 'evil eyes' when they brought out the gods, and they would dance devotional dances for the temple gods. Olafsson similarly writes of a daily ritual after dusk, in which the temple women had an important role to play:

These aforesaid temple maidens dance always before the gods every night from nine o'clock to midnight, and about the twelfth hour of the night, that is midnight, each of the twelve gods is carried up one street and down another, in a chariot, with torches, fireworks, trumpet-blowing and dancing, also the beating of the drums and other such marks of honour. We, who were standing on guard on the walls of the fortress, used to hear this every night. (Olafsson 1661/1998: 123)

In this extract, Olafsson describes the first two of the above mentioned, ritual roles.

In Olafsson's memoirs, he also seems to be describing a variation of the third of the above-mentioned roles, namely the enhancement of the power of royalty. Due to a shifting political situation involving the structure of temple patronage (Asher and Talbot 2006: 180), they might as well have been enhancing the head of a religious sect or of a group of temple landlords (Appadurai 1981; Koppedrayar 1991). Olafsson states:

In the winter, the chief of their priests, or bishop came to the town Trangobarich... At once there were a great commotion in the town. All the temple harlots set to adorn themselves in their usual finery... And when the chief priest, with great company, crossed the river on an elephant, he reclining in a palanquin made of ivory, gilded and adorned with the most costly work in the which he was carried, all this host began to display their usual pomp with drums, trumpets, dancing of harlots and sleights of hand exhibited by the soldiers, and this noise and rejoicing lasted all the way back to the town until he reached the temple. Then all the drums were beaten, trumpets pealed and the women flung themselves about in strange dances, according to their manner, and as their *baldor* taught them. (Olafsson 1661/1998: 127–28)

Whether they are royalty or religious leaders, the temple women still have the role of enhancing the power of the temple patrons. Royalty, as well as people of high religious status, were given similar prominence and the manner in which they were celebrated was alike (Koppedrayar 1991).

What further categorises the period of the Thanjavur courts from 1565 to 1856 in relation to temple women was the increasing integration between the dancing traditions of the court and those of the village temples. The Thanjavur Nayak dynasty—from 1614 to 1634—was ruled by Raghunatha Nayak, who is regarded as one of the greatest rulers of the dynasty, not because of his political power but because of his passion for, and patronage of, music and dance. He emphasised the preservation of culture as compensation for political insecurity, since the dynasty was surrounded by militarily superior empires (ibid.: 39). However, the growing international trade through European territories such as Tranquebar resulted in

a healthy economy, which consequently altered the hedonism at the court (Asher and Talbot 2006: 178).

On an artistic level, the village dance not only imitated the stylisation of the dance repertoire that was developing in the courts; dances were also being composed at the courts that integrated local elements from dancers in court temples (Kersenboom-Story 1987: 42). The level of exchange consisted of an actual transmission of dancers between village temples, court temples and the royal court. The exchange was especially strong between the court and the temple of Tiruvarur, approximately 40 kilometres south-west of Tranquebar.

Yet the roles of the temple women, according to Olafsson, seem to be more those of wild dancers and prostitutes who ‘flung themselves about in strange dances’ than that of auspicious females with ritual duties, of which devotional dances were just one. This moral evaluation has to be understood, however, in the context of the sources available about the temple women at the time. What categorises other European traveller accounts of this particular time is the use of the term ‘temple harlots’.

TEMPLE HARLOTS AND/OR TEMPLE MAIDENS: DISTINGUISHING FEMALE SEXUALITY

Joep Bor, a Dutch professor of museology, has written an article (2010) on Europe’s portrayal of Indian temple dancers since 1298 up until the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Bor, Marco Polo was the first European to write about the temple dancers, whom he saw in 1292 when he reached the Coromandel coast of present-day Tamil Nadu. According to him, people thought that the dancers were to offer their services at times when the gods’ relationships with their wives were problematic. When provided with the comfort and love of temple women, the gods were able to reconcile with the goddesses, which was considered necessary for peace among humanity (ibid.: 17). Marco Polo and later travellers took note of the fact that the dancers were well-esteemed and, in these early accounts, there is no mention of prostitution, yet note is taken that the dancers also provided men with erotic entertainment (ibid.: 16).

Marco Polo calls the women by the name ‘temple maidens’. According to Bor, the words that travellers chose to use when

describing these women give us an idea of how they were perceived (2010: 37). In his findings, the first time that the derogatory term *puttane del pagoda*—which can be translated as ‘temple harlots’—was used, was in 1590 by a Venetian jeweller, Gasparo Balbi (ibid.:16). The term, along with the description, carries a moral judgment which came to characterise European accounts of the temple dancers in the seventeenth century. Bor does not give us any idea why these terms may have changed over time. Whether it has to do with a changing perception among Europeans of Indian women and religion, or actual changes in the women’s roles, is difficult to determine. The fact remains that, in general, performing women in Europe had often previously been associated with prostitution and yet, in the seventeenth century, the moral attitude towards them became harsher along with the increased awareness of sexually-transmitted diseases and the targeting of brothels by the reformed churches.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, at the time of Olafsson’s departure from Denmark, the dominant European idea of Indian women was as sexually promiscuous (Balagangadhara 2005: 71). This image is reflected in Olafsson’s description of life at the Thanjavur court, which he describes in great detail as a harem, even though he never had a chance to visit.

But there are other things to tell about the King, firstly that besides his Queen he had, when we first came there, 900 concubines, but afterwards he gave up 300 of them to his son, but not those he kept himself, so that he himself had 600 on his register of sins. These concubines had a handsome and well-furnished hall with gilded pillars round it and windows of crystal glass: to this hall the King repaired daily to choose out for his fleshly lust whichever of them his heart desired. (Olafsson 1661/1998: 119)

The women at the court are seen by Olafsson as mere prostitutes, regardless of the privileged position that these women may have held.

Indian historian Priyadarshini Vijaisri has done research on what she calls ‘sacred prostitution’ (2004) in the Telugu and Kannada-speaking areas of South India—around Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh—during colonialism. Vijaisri found three coexisting patterns of sacred prostitution, representing the different positions of temple women, and varying depending on the women’s rural or urban settings and caste identity. Tied to these patterns are different Telugu

terms used for the temple women, namely *Sule/Sani*, *Jogati/Basavi* and *Matangi*. According to her, the position of temple women as a whole enabled an inclusion of lower-caste women in the temple complex while providing upper-caste men with sexual pleasure. Sex was thus sacralised within the temple complex, alongside the integration of Vamachari Tantric rituals tied to the worship of Shiva and Shakti (ibid.: 40). Vijaisri argues that the custom of sacred prostitution in many situations provided an alternative space for the women, outside the domestic sphere, in which they could be in direct contact with upper-caste men. On one side, this can be seen as a form of exploitation. On the other, this was a way in which outcaste women were given a central ritual position in the temple and local society (ibid.: 305). As a sacred prostitute, a temple woman could be associated with a patron with whom she could develop a relationship of love, or the women could have the freedom to have multiple sexual partners (ibid.: 16). Whereas lower-caste and outcaste women were considered immoral and loose among people of the upper castes, the temple women were not judged in the same manner. While Kersenboom-Story emphasises the respect that the women gained by focusing on their ritual roles within the temple complex and at a number of sacred ceremonies, Vijaisri explores their respected position, while including the role as a prostitute. To Vijaisri, the point is that, since female sexuality was positively evaluated, the position as sacred prostitute was part of her auspiciousness.

When these women were introduced to the Europeans by the local elite, the symbolic framework, through which the temple women were treated with respect, was challenged. When examining different sources on the temple dancers, according to Bor (2010), one stands out as more than a superficial description based on earlier accounts. This is one presented in 1786 by the Dutchman, Jacob Haafner, who lived in South India for several years. Through his love-relationship with a temple dancer, he obtained a special insight into their world. He added a crucial refinement to the image of the temple dancers by differentiating between actual temple dancers and troupes of independent dancers, who moved from place to place and performed at weddings and festivals (ibid.: 21). The importance of this insight needs to be stressed.

Following this, I question whether there were women in Tranquebar doing different chores at the temple rituals, and who were different from entertainers who might or might not have been

involved in prostitution. It is worth noting that, when describing the women that danced devotional dances for the gods, Olafsson calls them ‘temple maidens’. In another passage he even describes a procession in which ‘two females’ are present at the ritual:

In these three seats are placed the three aforementioned gods. On each seat are placed two females with gilded fans, to wave them over these idols, so that no dust, mote or fly should settle or fall on them. (Olafsson 1661/1998: 121)

Whether these are used to express differences in the imagined relationship to the temple based on age, chores and economic arrangements is difficult to determine. However, it is worth noticing that those temple women who are doing tasks considered outside of the performing realm are not directly classified as prostitutes. In dealing with the terms used for temple women, it is equally interesting to look into the local vernacular. Inscriptions from the Chola period in the area show a number of terms for the women connected to the temple, implying different roles. Kersenboom-Story mentions the following: *tevaratiyar* (servants of god), *rsabhataliyilar* (those belonging to the temple of the bull), *talaccerippentukal* (women belonging to the streets of the temple), *nakkam* (meaning either ‘naked’ or ‘elder sister’), *rudraganika* (‘courtesan’ of Rudra/Shiva), *manikkam* (‘dancing girl’ or ‘female who waves the sacred light of camphor’) (1989: 28). The meticulousness of the terms suggests a differentiation between different females within the temple rather than a single typical ‘devadasi’. The inscriptions from the end of the Chola period in Tamil Nadu, however, suggest that the Tamil term for servant of god, *tevaratiyar*, was mostly in use (seventy-five per cent of all inscriptions) (Orr 2000: 53). In contrast, around Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, terms were used for temple women that imply prostitutes—sacred prostitutes (Vijaisri 2004: 40). It is worth noting that neither the Tamil term *nityasumangali* nor the Sanskrit word *devadasi* were in use at the time.

According to Bor, among Europeans, the term ‘temple whores’ or ‘temple harlots’ continued to be in use into the eighteenth century, especially among missionaries. This supports my argument, set forth in a previous article (Puri 2009), that the moral judgment of the temple dancers is tied to religion. Thus, the German missionary Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg writes from Tranquebar in

1711, as a part of his description of South India's poetry, music and dance, that:

Such singers and dancers are nothing more than everyone's whores, who have a privileged way of carrying out their business, and thus are called dancing whores by the Europeans. (Ziegenbalg, quoted in Bor 2010: 18)

Here Ziegenbalg seems to separate the European perspective from the local one. He acknowledges that the women have a privileged position in local society, yet he points out that they are considered mere whores by the Europeans.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century, among non-missionaries in Europe, the image of the dancers had changed to that of beautiful, well-educated and conspicuously dressed women, skilled in dancing and singing (Bor 2010: 20). This coincides with the sophistication of the dance form, through the involvement of the Thanjavur court and the 'Tanjore Quartet'⁴ composing specific music for staged dance, at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Gaston 2005: 145). At this time, the art form had developed independently of the rural temples, and it is these court dancers who form the basis for European accounts and reinterpretations of Indian temple dancers, and which are perfect examples of the prevailing orientalism. As part of the exoticism of the Orient, temple dancers became popular sources of inspiration for poets, as well as for dancers of the West (Bor 2010: 126–37). This was best exemplified through the American dancer, Ruth St. Dennis (1879–1968), who performed choreography inspired by Hindu mythology and did so adorned with jewellery and clothes resembling those of temple dancers (Allan 1997: 85–94).

MONEY AND THE OWNERSHIP OF TEMPLE WOMEN

Olafsson is clearly fascinated by the wealth of the temples, as well as that of the courts, and he writes passages describing the adornment of the temple women in greater detail than the women themselves:

Their costume is as follows. They have, like others, drawers of gold brocade studded with precious stones and pearls and with much money,

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and splendid kerchief [bodice] costing a very sum over their breast, with other rings and precious stones of surpassing value, placed about their body and taken off as convenient. (Olafsson 1661/1998: 123)

In this chapter's epitaph, he furthermore writes how all this finery is hung up in the temple by the women, making it clear that these are not the possessions of the women but of the temple. The fact that temple women carried this wealth strongly supports the idea of these women being well-respected. However, Olafsson also seems to see this as a manifestation of the temple's ownership of the women. This ownership is furthermore mediated, according to Olafsson, by the 'baldor', who rents out the women for money, as we saw in the epitaph. The question, however, remains, on what grounds Olafsson made the assumption that the women he sees at the temple are the same women he has been told are prostituting themselves for the soldiers.

According to Kersenboom-Story, because the devadasis were considered auspicious, they were 'rented' out to take part in ceremonies held for pregnant females, name-giving, ear-piercing and weddings (1987: 66). One could question whether it is possible that Olafsson, in his understanding of 'baldor', mixes up some of these economic transactions with sexual transactions. Yet, one should at the same time also be careful not to ignore the existence of prostitution in the context of the temples as part of a focus on the respectability of the women based on contemporary notions of what respectability implies. The point is that an awareness of the existence of prostitution affects Olafsson's understanding of the temple women as a whole, based on assumptions connected to earning women, while putting a moral judgement on not only the women but, indeed, also on the temple institution.

In dealing with the question of money, it is interesting to bring in the work of American historian of religion, Leslie Orr. Her work in many ways offers a refreshing perspective on the temple women, as a consequence of her focus on economic transactions. She concentrates on two kinds of transactions: the money or land given to women for their work by the temple warden and the money given by women to temples as donations (Orr 2000: 8). According to Orr, travellers' accounts of temple women from the sixteenth and seventeenth century are, in fact, too fragmented and polemical

to use as evidence to elucidate the role of the temple women. In my attempt to reconstruct the roles of the temple women in Tranquebar from such accounts, I can only agree with her. Orr's approach, in her examination of temple inscriptions during the Chola period—where the donations of and for women have been engraved in the stone walls—thus offers an alternative to the reconstruction of the history of these women. What Orr has discovered from these inscriptions is that there were women who, by donating money to the temples, gained the right to do tasks which were socially recognised—tasks such as escorting the temple gods and goddesses' statues during processions, as the females described by Olafsson do.

These female donors and/or devotees could, through their gifts and ritual participation, gain social recognition in return and even acquire land given by the temple. At the time, women could only gain status through marriage, as well as caste. In local society, for widowers, divorcees and unmarried women from the lower castes, becoming a temple woman could be a way to climb the social and economic ladder (*ibid.*: 75). Orr emphasises that dancing and other chores were a privilege rather than a duty (*ibid.*: 106). Part of the privilege is manifested in the opportunity to dress up as a wealthy woman or a goddess. Moreover, according to Orr, at that time there was no such thing as sacred prostitution going hand in hand with that privilege (*ibid.*: 17).

Even though Orr's data is from long before 1623, her material shows a clear, increasing tendency of inscriptions bearing female names, which suggests that the system of female donors that she portrays was on the increase rather than the decline. The inscriptions also show that there was an increasing number of temple women with the role of dancing and singing, as opposed to cleaning and making garlands during this period (*ibid.*: 95). According to Orr, the temple women's activities were not sacralised as such, but rather a way to do honourable work through service. Ironically, it was at the courts, when the temple dance was stylised, that their work was later sacralised and became more of a devotional activity (*ibid.*: 178). Orr argues that the ritualisation of these women's activities at the court, which had started in the seventeenth century, actually meant a decline in their power in their local environments, as their role became more artistic and less a question of social status and economic opportunity (*ibid.*: 179).

Orr argues that we cannot just use the data from one region and apply it to another, assuming that there was a pan-Indian devadasi system (ibid.: 5); and, in that vein, there are limitations to Orr's sources in relation to this study. Whereas Orr 'is' dealing with the coastal area of Tamil Nadu, her time period is the Chola period (AD 850–1300) and thus, following her recommendation, I would be very cautious in using her data to shed light on the role and activities of the temple women in Tranquebar in 1600. Her data is still unique, however, as it deals with the temple women prior to Olafsson's arrival, rather than later, as is the case with almost all other works.

Orr criticises Kersenboom-Story's work specifically for searching for a devadasi tradition which goes beyond time and place. She sees it as a problem that, because of the lack of firsthand accounts, Kersenboom-Story uses data from the present to shed light on the past. She also sees it as a problem that, in dealing with the scattered documented past, she is relying on Sanskrit religious literature and Tamil poetic literature in which dancers are described in a mythical manner and fused with non-human/divine dancers such as *apsaras* (Orr 2000: 7). Even though I tend to agree with her critique, Kersenboom-Story's work has been very useful for me since she does, in fact, in a few pages, deal specifically with Tamil Nadu in the seventeenth century—a time otherwise largely missing from the historical examinations of temple women.

In line with this critique, Orr is very conscious of her use of the term 'temple women', rather than 'devadasis' as Kersenboom-Story partly uses and 'temple dancers' as Bor uses. The term devadasi, which is a Sanskritised version of the Tamil term *tevaratiyal*, was not really used until the 1920s, in the legislative debate over their abolition (ibid.: 5). The term 'temple dancer', which has been in use in the West, on the other hand, Orr finds to be misrepresentative of the women working at the temples because dancing was just one of many roles they had.

The focus on their dance at the expense of other roles, Orr argues, is part of the fascination these women have. This is partly tied to the fact that the majority of research on the temple women has been done by practitioners of bharatanatyam, including myself, who find inspiration for their dance practice in these women's devotion to their role as dancers and devotees. Furthermore, research on the history of temple women has focused on the restoration of dance techniques in order to revive a cultural heritage, encouraged by national institutions

of arts (Chatterjea 1998). As a bharatanatyam dancer and researcher, one is furthermore affected by a national discourse on the dance that stresses the respectability of these historical dancers as part of the sacralisation of the dance, and which allows staged eroticism in middle-class settings. As an example of this, I would refer to an earlier article of mine (Puri 2009) in which, as a researcher and bharatnatyam dancer, I was not as removed from that discourse as I now believe myself to be.

THE DEATH OF TEMPLE DANCING AND THE BIRTH OF BHARATANATYAM

Concurrently with the increasing fascination with the Indian temple dancers in Europe, towards the end of the nineteenth century in India, a movement developed among the Indian elite which proclaimed the abolition of females devoted to temples because of sexual exploitation (Srinivasanan 1987; Hubel 2010). The loosening integration between temple and court as part of a shifting political system first connected to the Nayak kingdoms (Appadurai 1981; Asher and Talbot 2006) and, later, to British colonialism, had entailed a gradual decline in the patronage of the temple women at the village level. Consequently, the temple women became dependent on money provided to them for entertainment as artists outside the temple walls, to a greater extent from wealthy Indian and British men. In this transformation, the temple dancers of South and North India came to be known as *nautch* girls, an anglicised version of the Sanskrit word for dance, *natya*. Nautch is a term which carried a similar association to that of harlot.

The 'anti-nautch movement', which later became known as the 'abolitionists', emerged among an urban Indian elite influenced by Christian morality. The active members were mainly missionaries, journalists, doctors, as well as Brahmins (Orr 2000: 14). The movement worked for the abolition of what became known as the 'devadasi institution', which they associated with the nautch girls. At that time, women were ritually married to temple deities and they performed at temple ceremonies in villages, where some of them had personal patrons. With the Devadasi Bill, passed in 1947, women's 'dedication' to temples and dancing as part of temple rituals was banned in the state of Madras, including

Tranquebar (Reddi 2010: 117). Women, regardless of what kind of work they were doing at the temples, were banned, despite the fact that the Madras Devadasi Associations insisted that far from all devadasis were working as prostitutes (Madras Devadasi Association 2010).

Parallel to this, there was another movement, known as the 'revivalists', among the elites of Madras with ties to the royal families, which advocated a restoration or revival of the dance of the devadasis. From the 1920s onwards, there was therefore renewed interest in preserving the dance as part of a national, Indian culture (Meduri 1988). The revivalists, and especially Rukimini Devi from upper-class Madras, further stylised the dance. As Devi was inspired by the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta, the theosophical society, as well as classical Western ballet, she claimed the dance to be a highly spiritual practice and therefore suited to the cultural education of middle and upper-class Indian girls (Allen 1997). In line with the mood at the time leading up to Indian independence, both the abolitionists and the revivalists were concerned with an all-India, national identity, which was intended to take the subcontinent out of colonialism. In this search for a common cultural heritage, art became of great political significance. As interesting as this transformation is on a cultural, political and legislative level, a great deal has already been written in this regard, so I shall be brief in this chapter (Srinivasanan 1985; Parker 1998; Jordan 2003; Chakravorty 2000; Schechner 1985; O'Shea 1998, 2006; Meduri 1988; Gaston 2005; Peterson and Soneji 2008).

It can today be difficult to determine when and whether sex work can actually be linked to a hereditary devadasi institution persisting within the temple sphere, or whether the tradition involved is one of a community of sex workers defined by their association with a regular client/male patron rather than a temple (Orchard 2007). The bharatanatyam dancers of today do, nonetheless, claim to be continuing the devadasi tradition, connecting themselves to localities such as Tranquebar concurrently with an insistence on their respectability in the past. The devadasis or temple dancers are recorded as still being currently employed at temples; however, they enjoy far less respect in India than at the time Jon Olafsson observed them, and without the same variety of roles within the temple complex. In Tamil Nadu, there are no official statistics on their number; however, a total of 46,660 are—according to a census report from 2007–08—in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, believed to be associated with

temples, a number on the rise (Nayak 2011). However, judging from the number of bharatanatyam dance institutions located in the larger cities around India, and the growing interest in the dance among the middle classes, the number of bharatanatyam dancers today may exceed that of those classified as devadasis.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF HISTORY FOR PRESENT-DAY BHARATANATYAM DANCERS

Actually, it was present-day bharatanatyam dancers that led me to an interest in Tranquebar and not the other way around. Today, the most cherished settings for dance performances are the temples in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. The largest annual bharatanatyam dance festival is in Chidambaram, north of Tranquebar (O'Shea 2007). From these temple settings, bharatanatyam dancers express a sense of superhuman power tied to the authenticity of the temples, some of which have carvings of dancing women (Puri 2011). Young students state one of their greatest desires as being to visit the temples in Tamil Nadu which are known to have had devadasis. Part of my findings from fieldwork among urban middle-class young women learning bharatanatyam (of the Thanjavur style) in Delhi shows how dance students use the history of the temple dancers and the different perspectives on their moral character to position themselves in a modern Indian setting (*ibid.*).

For most dancers, the devadasis have become a symbol of empowerment. Many dance students dream of a life in which they can devote themselves fully to dance, as they imagine was the case for the temple women. Even though it was in the courts that the dance became refined as an art form, the dance students are only interested in searching for a connection to the past through the temples. This is part of their exclusive focus on the devotional identity of the devadasis.

In a previous publication (Puri 2009), I examined how Christian bharatanatyam dancers encountered religiosity in the dance and how they found a unique devotional way of relating to their Christian god, inspired by Hinduism and the Bhakti movement. Bharatanatyam thus provided them with a practice through which they could be involved in religious work in the form of a spiritual practice. This was not unique to the Christian dancers; at the institute where I

conducted my research, regardless of their religious affiliation, every dancer defined the dance as a spiritual practice through which they could get closer to their god. The Christian dancers compared the practice with the work of nuns, whereas Hindu dancers made the connection to female saints.

Since the 1990s, it has been common to begin any performance with an English explanation of the dance (O'Shea 2003). The audience is told that when the dancer shows us how she longs (in all the limbs of her body) to be with/make love to Krishna, it is a representation of the longing for a union with god. Since the time of the revival of the dance, the emphasis on the spirituality of the dance has gone hand in hand with a particular framing of its erotic aspects. Ironically, this framing has been further solidified through a verbalisation of the symbolism of the dance, through dance explanations, as part of the interest shown by Westerners—who are currently also well-represented among audiences—in the dance.

When asked about the spiritual significance of the dance for her, as a first response a dancer would often give me an explanation almost identical to the one presented on stage. However, after talking to the dancers over a long period of time, as well as using non-formalised methodologies, they conveyed the idea that the dance indeed also represents opportunities for a career, as well as a way of exploring their own sexuality. In *bharatanatyam*, they can do this in a public space without becoming vulnerable. Religion thus provides them with a kind of symbolic, protective veil on the stage, defined as a sacred space (Puri 2011). Likewise, Anne Marie Gaston has claimed (1995) that the desire for the spirituality of *bharatanatyam* is actually a desire for social acceptance.

For modern-day dance students, the sexual liberty of the temple women is not often encountered as a question of morality but of personal freedom. Dance students of the middle classes, many of whom had had relationships prior to marriage, emphasised the freedom that the *devadasis* had both in relationship to dance and to men, as opposed to other women of their time.

Despite this, the dance students themselves acted as strict moral judges in front of other dancers. When I attended—in the audience, accompanied by fellow dance students—I noticed how important it was for them that it was clearly a devotional and not a human love that was represented in the dance. If desires were shown in a 'too human' way they would judge them as 'vulgar' as opposed to

the dancers who were 'subtle' and 'cute'. Further, they would not only evaluate them in relation to their dance but also their assumed intentions with the dance (see also, Cowhan 1990). In addition, they would judge every dancer whom they thought motivated by fame and money rather than respect for the art and spiritual development. Despite the differing narratives dependent on context, the dancers partake in the nationalistic discourse through which the dance is defined as a spiritual practice rather than a form of entertainment, career advancement or personal enjoyment.

In this discursive space, the dance still provides an empowerment, available to middle and upper-class females, who can pay the tuition fees for their dance classes of approximately Rs 500 a month. Yet, the dancers of today still navigate a fine line between performers and devotees. Dancers explained how they felt that people generally looked on them with a great deal of respect as dancers. The same people would not, however, want a performing dancer as a wife or daughter-in-law. It is not dancing as such that is perhaps considered against the moral code but dancing in the public sphere. Bharatanatyam is mostly respected as a kind of cultural education for young females, but not as a career path.

For most bharatanatyam dance students today, the dance is therefore an expense rather than a source of income. Not unlike the temple women whom Orr was describing, the dancers donate money and gifts to their (usually female) guru in order to be able to learn the dance, and through which they improve their social status. Bharatanatyam dancers of today, as opposed to devadasis, thus have the luxury of not having to dance for an income. Dancing shows that one has the money to dance rather than the need to dance for money.

Several dance students not only learn the movements but also study the history of the dance. Kersenboom-Story's book was one of the most popular among the dancers, maybe because of her emphasis on the respect the dancers enjoyed in the past, as well as her focus on them as devotees with ritual functions. Historical (European) accounts of the history of the dancers, on the other hand, are not popular reading among the dancers. Yet, if we are to believe the dance students themselves, the moral judgement of the devadasis, similar to that of Olafsson, still prevails and frames the general public's understanding of bharatanatyam dancers despite the discourse on the dance represented on the national stages.

CONCLUSION

In addition to providing insight into the practice of temple women in Tranquebar and beyond, I have, in this chapter, presented a complex set of intercultural encounters concerning the role of and perspective on the devadasis. With a focus on European accounts of temple dancers in the seventeenth century especially, as well as a quick look at the position of present-day bharatanatyam dancers, I illustrate how the body of the female dancers are a site of contestation over meaning, then and now. I believe that the encounters in seventeenth century Tranquebar help identify the problematic (public) space in which the Indian female moves, as the temple women are at the heart of important issues related to female religion, sexuality and economy.

Overall, the chapter deals with cultural encounters between Europeans and Indians, between men and women, and—within India—between people of different socio-economic backgrounds and regions, in addition to encounters over time between present-day dancers and the temple women of the past. Studies on cultural encounters are crucial for an understanding of the symbolic representation of cultural differences (Fihl and Puri 2009). The encounters here all involve a contest over what ought to be the relationship between religion, sexuality and economy with regard to women. A contest brought about through the question of who and what the devadasis or temple women really were, which remains a contested question.

The point that I wish to make as the chapter comes to its end is that the temple women/devadasis are a strong symbol which condenses cultural meaning as well as paradoxes. Not unlike, the ‘dominant symbol’ of Mary Douglas (1966) and Viktor Turner (1969) categorised by ‘multivocality’, it can be used in many different ways by different people. To people of Scheduled Castes today, the devadasis are a symbol of repression, similar to the repression they feel as a community. To the cultural elite, the devadasis have become a symbol of a unique, Indian, spiritual tradition. To academics, they are either respected women breaking with hierarchical and male-dominated structures or repressed women within these structures. To Westerners in India during early as well as late colonialism, the devadasis became a symbol of what was considered a primitive civilisation, based on the values of a corrupted religion which ought to be controlled. My chapter focuses on how these differing perspectives on devadasis have to be understood within historical and regional parameters, in relation

to cultural encounters and the categorisations tied to different sources of knowledge, grounded in certain moral contexts.

NOTES

1 The following is a note from the translation: ‘Dr. Blöndal points out that Jon’s *baldor* represents the Port. *bailador*, from *baila*, to dance, whence comes the term *bayadère* (Port. *bailadeira*) for temple-dancing girls. Jon’s *pagógasirke* should be read *pagoda-sirukki*, pagoda for dancing girls or women (Tamil).’ As suggested by Will Sweetman, *padôgasirke* could be the temple (*pagoda* in Portuguese, perhaps from *pagavadi* in Tamil) situated next to Fort Dansborg on a map done by Matthæus Seutter in the first part of the eighteenth century. It could also be the Cintadurai Temple, which is also in the near vicinity of the fort.

2 As part of the nationalisation of the dance originating in South India, I have been interested in how the imagination of the of *devadasis* in rural South India have had a significance for Tamils as well as non-Tamils living in Delhi, which has become the institutional centre for the nationalisation of arts.

3 The *agamic* temples were built based on the *agamas*, texts written in both Tamil and Sanskrit, in which there—among other things—were guidelines for temple construction, the creation of idols and idol worship. The agamic tradition can also be referred to as tantrism, when not used specifically with references to the Shakta Agamas.

4 The ‘Tanjore Quartet’ consisted of four brothers recruited to the Thanjavur court in the early-nineteenth century because of their skills in south Indian carnatic music. They composed specific musical pieces for dance, which today forms part of the basic compositions for the repertoire of bharatanatyam.

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